

VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE FOR THE
VISUALLY HANDICAPPED

Arthur J. Ryan

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Vocational Guidance for the Visually Handicapped

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★ *The blind no longer are thrust arbitrarily into piano tuning, weaving, and the making of brooms. Through a scientific approach to the problem, through sound vocational guidance, they have been helped to enter almost as wide a variety of occupations as those not visually handicapped.*

RECENTLY A YOUNG man of eighteen years who had been blind from birth had his vision completely restored by an operation. If you can imagine such an experience you will surely share this young man's belief in a miracle. We cannot truly prognosticate success for this young man simply because he now has sight but we do know from his early experiences as a blind person that his chances of success are excellent. As a boy without sight, he had, with the understanding help of his mother, learned to be normal. It was necessary, of course, for him to have some instruction by special methods as a blind person, but at every opportunity he lived, played, studied, and worked with sighted boys and girls. For this early and splendid adjustment he gives credit to his mother who was one of those persons with a bit of innate psychology and a sincere desire to make her son a normal person. One day she gave him a very important lesson. Taking a ball and placing it in his hand, she told him to hold it, which of course he could with ease. She compared the five fingers of his hand to his five senses, but then asked him to hold the ball with any four of his fingers, which with a little more effort he also could do.

In a crude way she had demonstrated making four senses do the work of five, but it was sufficient to start her son on the road to normal living even without sight. Though we are as happy as he to know that he will never again be blind, we do know that every blind person must himself endeavor in every respect to be normal and to prove his normality to sighted people.

A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

This is the basis on which vocational guidance and placement programs for the visually handicapped are being established today. Schools and agencies, public and private, are striving to put their programs on this normal, scientific basis and as proof of its success are placing more visually handicapped persons in competition with sighted labor than ever before.

Of course some special methods must be used. Some occupations are too hazardous for people lacking in sight to perform. Specific barriers excluding blind persons from certain types of employment might include such hazardous occupations as moving mechanical machines, occupations that require sight for computations, and some professions where sight is essential for operations and diagnosis.

Among the other barriers in industry faced by visually handicapped persons are eye conditions and their relation to employment, adjustments of newly blinded persons, practices of employing and discharging blind workers, and the possible application of compensation and insurance rates in the employment of the blind.

Employers in several instances have de-

clined to employ blind persons in their organizations due to previous unfortunate experiences. They found themselves in a position of performing an inhuman act if they discharged an unsatisfactory blind employee. A blind person is just as susceptible to a bad job performance as a sighted person, but it is definitely the job of the placement agent for the blind to supervise every blind employee and make adjustments by transfer or discharge when necessary.

In respect to the application of insurance rates, no special consideration is made when visually handicapped persons are employed. All blind persons are placed in the same status as other employees.

Some blind persons have additional handicaps which make some special occupational provisions necessary. Nevertheless, the majority of our graduates are going off to colleges with their sighted friends, working in offices, in shops, in factories, and in various other mixed groups where they will compete because they insist on being normal and extremely well trained. They must be normal, act normal, and be accepted as normal for the simple reason that they have a physical defect and not a mental one.

A NATIONAL PLAN

With the general advance in scientific methods of vocational guidance and placement in all branches of education and industry, the special schools and agencies for the visually handicapped have likewise revised and rebuilt their programs to fit the ever-growing demands of the occupational world. This has been in conjunction with a nation-wide plan to promote better vocational preparation and opportunities for visually handicapped persons. The first step toward a better organization of methods came with the establishment of a national vocational guidance plan. This plan was evolved by a committee representing a national organization of

workers for the blind, and since adoption by a large number of schools it has proved very satisfactory. A majority of the schools for the blind in the United States now have a similar vocational guidance program and many of these set-ups rival the best in schools for the sighted. Most of the former misconceptions for the blind have disappeared. We now seldom hear of "Occupations for the Blind," the blind as a "class," or the contention that all blind people are musicians or beggars. Blind people are socially, vocationally, and morally just about of the same calibre as sighted people in general. However, too often the deficiencies of the blind person are still considered to be directly related to his inability to see, and not to the fact that he, like many sighted people, has some or many deficiencies.

The experiences of sighted people with the blind have generally in the past been limited to seeing him on the street selling something. Likewise many still retain the belief that blind persons possess gifted abilities in music or in crafts. This is as false as the conception that blind people hear better. The latter can be attributed to the fact that the interpretation of daily experiences comes mainly through hearing and thus they appear to comprehend to a greater degree by the acuity of hearing.

Every school for the blind has the dual role of providing both academic and vocational education for all pupils, with, of course, the exception of those who go on to colleges. The majority of schools are beginning to expand their curriculums, especially in the new opportunities for vocational training. In one or two instances schools that gave complete vocational training in four or five vocational subjects several years ago now offer ten or twelve complete training courses.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

A list of vocational training courses given in one of the schools for the blind

today with the time required for the complete mastery of each subject follows:

SUBJECT	TIME
Poultry Keeping	Three years
Weaving	Three years
Piano Tuning and Repairing	Three years
Dictaphone Operation and Braille Shorthand	Three years
Power Sewing Machine Operation	Two years plus three months apprenticeship
Small Store Operation	Two years actual practice
Chair Caning and Press-Seating	Three years
Vocational Music	Four years plus special tutoring
Social Work for the Blind	Two years training in each vocational subject, plus one year of social work training
Physio-therapy	Two years

In addition to these there are a great number of pre-vocational subjects which are either prerequisites to the above courses or to some branch of vocational training which will be completed outside the school for the blind. It is also possible to take a college preparatory course.

The apprenticeship plan, though still operating on a small scale, is proving of great value in bridging the gap between school and work. It has been given additional impetus with the passing by Congress of the Randolph-Sheppard Act. This act created a real opportunity to place visually handicapped persons on a normal working basis. With the increased requirements for defense, blind persons are now successfully operating power machines of various types and performing all the tasks for which sighted labor was previously considered essential. For these and a great variety of other jobs, blind men and women are now being prepared.

VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE IN ONE INSTITUTION

The New York Institute for the Education of the Blind has functioned under the following vocational guidance plan for the past three years. With the exception of a few minor changes the plan has worked

very successfully. Since the total enrollment of students in the entire school averages about two hundred and fifteen, it is not necessary to have a full time vocational counselor, but since there continues to be so much organization in the work it is necessary that one person devote at least one-half of each school day to vocational guidance activities. Classes start at 8:35 A.M. after an assembly program, and end at 5:30 P.M. In addition it is necessary to have some clerical assistance, and allot at least one afternoon each week to visiting special agencies concerned with the placement of the blind, and the follow-up of graduates. This field work is essential to good guidance and keeps the counselor in close contact with employment opportunities.

Every student in the school receives special consideration regarding his vocational plans when he has either completed the ninth grade or is seventeen years of age. It is compulsory for every boy and girl in this category to plan his final three-year program with the vocational counselor and the assistant principal. Previously only the approval of the assistant principal has been required in his choice of subjects. During the month of May each student is interviewed by the counselor and the assistant principal. General plans are made with each boy and girl for the balance of his vocational and academic studies in the school. Every student is required to take at least two vocational subjects during his final three years in school in addition to an academic program. These must definitely prepare him for a job. Other courses are sometimes required as pre-vocational. Arrangements are also made for actual work practice in or near the school or apprenticeship in chosen occupations outside the school.

Since the school has the double duty of preparing all students academically and vocationally, a long study day of eight hours and forty minutes is necessary. Furthermore, since the public, and particularly employers, tend to discredit the

possibility of a blind person's performing any machine operations, it is necessary for every blind person who has made this choice of vocation to be trained better than the average sighted worker.

Interviews by the vocational counselor and the assistant principal are repeated at least twice each school year as routine, on other occasions to fill out the necessary record forms, to check on the original program, and to watch the progress of the pupil. The doctor, ophthalmologist, and dentist examine every child; every pupil has a hearing test, an intelligence test, and an interest and ability test. Personality reports are obtained from housemothers and teachers, while social workers' reports are likewise obtained through visits to the homes. All this information is compiled on regular forms placed in a folder and filed according to name and class.

The next step in the program is a conference with the alumni vocational guidance committee, a group composed of three blind men and women who have had at least ten years' successful occupational experience. These people visit the school two or three times each year and talk over problems with individual members of the sophomore and junior classes. The pupils really "open up" to these older successful blind people and as a result clear up many problems directly correlated with the loss of sight based on the experience of the older blind person.

A final check-up is made approximately six months previous to graduation. All available information is incorporated on the record forms and a copy is forwarded to the local agency concerned with the placement of that particular person. The placement agent is not a stranger to even this early information, for he, too, has either talked with the pupil in school, or the pupil has visited the agency some time during his last year in school.

In June after graduation or after the pupil has reached the age of twenty-one, he is no longer under the jurisdiction of

the school. If he resides in Greater New York one of the private agencies will give him assistance in obtaining employment. No agency in the city is obligated to place any blind person but each one accepts responsibility for a certain territory.

The New York State Commission for the Blind is responsible for the needs of the blind in the state outside the metropolitan area. This agency will endeavor to secure employment or other needs for any person with vision in his best eye of 20/200 or less. This means that what a normal sighted person can read at 200 feet, the blind person can only read at 20 feet.

Under the sponsorship of the Greater New York Council of Agencies for the Blind, specific consideration is being given problems of vocational guidance, training, and placement by committees composed of placement agents, educators of the blind, and personnel directors of industrial establishments. The prime purpose of these meetings is to enhance the possibilities of employment of the blind in competition with the sighted. Representatives from both groups present their proposals and objections for discussion, resulting in the solution of many problems previously given biased consideration.

The whole problem of vocational guidance for the visually handicapped will require much greater concerted effort from the blind people themselves as well as from counselors and placement officers in the field, before a solution can be reached. Agencies throughout the entire country are endeavoring to perform an impossible task with understaffed and untrained personnel. Funds are inadequate, training facilities outside schools are practically non-existent. The Federal Government with the establishment of a bureau of services for the blind will supplement to a large extent the efforts of private agencies which are willing but unable to carry out this program. There, is therefore, a brighter future ahead in the occupational world for visually handicapped persons.

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